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ABSTRACT

A study was done examining the experiences of four California community colleges that received pilot program grants to participate in a legislatively mandated, statewide accountability program. The participating colleges were Mount San Antonio College (Los Angeles), San Joaquin Delta College (Stockton), San Jose-Evergreen, and Santa Barbara City College. The data collection included centralized collection and reporting of information on student access, student success, student satisfaction, staff composition, and fiscal condition. Also as part of the study, the colleges and the state Chancellor's office developed a guide for local use and a systemwide accountability program. The study found that accountability had two meanings: at the state level it was tied to educational finance and the desire to make policy based on objective, defensible information. At the local, college level, it was linked to institutional effectiveness. The findings also seemed to suggest that, though features of the state accountability program are similar to recommendations made in Total Quality Management, colleges did not embrace that approach. Conclusions emphasized the importance of evaluation and assessment comprising multiple sources and types of information for a composite picture. Included are 23 references. (JB)

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Tough Love or Cooperative Learning?

Accountability for Higher Education

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Chancellor's Office

California Community Colleges

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Abstract

Recent legislation mandated a statewide accountability program for California's Community Colleges. This study describes the experiences of four colleges that received pilot program grants. The main finding was that accountability had two meanings. At the state level it ties to educational finance, and the desire to make policy based on objective, defensible information. At the local, college level it links to institutional effectiveness. Many of California's colleges currently lack the technical resources for an accountability or institutional effectiveness program. A plan to improve readiness for accountability included basic data collection and reporting, in-depth accountability studies, surveys of student satisfaction and long range program effectiveness, improved data collection, and a clearinghouse.

Tough Love or Cooperative Learning?
Accountability for Higher Education

Introduction

"Semantic aphasia" is a state of mind that results from the mantra-like recitation of a word or phrase -- it loses meaning. This sometimes appears true for "accountability." This study describes the struggle to define "accountability" by a group of community college educators, including students, faculty, administrators, and trustees. A central dilemma in creating this definition related to the role of the statewide Chancellor's Office as either a tough (love) overseer, or as a provider of technical assistance and leadership (cooperative learning) for local institutional effectiveness programs. According to one view the Chancellor's Office would adopt the role of a coach, trying to improve the team's performance.

> "By design and by talent," wrote basketball player Bill Russell of his team, the Boston Celtics, "we were a team of specialists, and like a team of specialists in any field, our performance depended both on individual excellence and how well we worked together. None of us had to strain to understand that we had to complement each others' specialties; it was simply a fact, and we all tried to figure out ways to make our combination more effective." (Peter M. Senge, p. 233)

A very different view of accountability may stem from public concerns about the quality of higher education -- student loan defaults, the difficulty of obtaining required courses, or the length of time needed for completion. According to this other view, the Chancellor's Office would use information to satisfy the public's right to know, centralize control, and

require improvements.

> "The environments of colleges and universities are increasingly characterized by turbulence, competitiveness, lean resources, unpredictability, and periodic decline . ... when organizations face conditions they define as threatening, the tendency is to become rigid -- for example, centralized, conservative, protective, inflexible, and non adaptable. ..." (Cameron & Tschirart, p. 88)

Milieu

A sweeping legislative reform of the California Community Colleges in 1988 provided the system with $140 million in new funds and required the state Board to develop and implement a comprehensive educational and fiscal accountability system. (Board of Governors, 1989; MacDougall and Friedlander, 1990) The mandate was "to produce a published report of California Community College accountability," that should cover such topics as student access, transfer to senior institutions, achievement, satisfaction, program completion, occupational preparation, basic skills, English as a second language, diversity, and fiscal conditions.

Policymakers debated the issues of funding for education and accountability at this time. By a narrow margin, voters amended the state's constitution in 1988 to establish a minimum level of state funding for schools and community colleges. This school funding initiative, known as Proposition 98, also required the preparation of "School Accountability Report Cards" for K-12 schools, but not for community colleges. (California Secretary of State, 1988). Each public school district board had to issue an annual report for every school covering student achievement, dropouts, expenditures, class size, teacher assignment, textbooks, counseling, substitute teachers, safety, teacher evaluation, classroom climate, staff development, and leadership.

The governance of California's Community College System is certainly relevant to the task of defining accountability. (Commission for the Review of the Master Plan for Higher Education, 1987; Board of Governors, 1989). The decentralized nature of community college governance may limit the generalizability of this study to other states. There are 71 districts, including 107 colleges, which serve about 1.3 million students. At the state level the Board of Governors provides leadership and direction in the development of the system while maintaining as much local authority and control as possible. Local governing boards establish, maintain and operate local colleges according to law. There is no formal linkage between the Board of Governors and local governing boards or between local chief administrative officers and the statewide Chancellor. The statewide Board of Governors operates more as a coordinating agency than as a governing body for the colleges.

Method

The initial planning for the accountability program called for centralized collection and reporting of information in five areas: Student access, student success, student satisfaction, staff composition, and fiscal condition. The purposes of a state level report include systemwide planning, policy, and budget formulation. Local colleges would submit the required information to the state Board, which would then prepare and issue a report.

The vision of centralized data collection and reporting evolved. An eighteen month pilot program began in January, 1991 with $375,000 in grants awarded to four community college districts in order to produce prototype accountability reports and strategies for improving the quality of student outcomes. A task force provided consultation to the colleges and to the state Chancellor's Office for the development of a guide for local use and a systemwide accountability program. The colleges that were selected for grants may

not be truly representative of California's 107 local colleges or 71 districts, since they possessed exceptional data processing and research capabilities.

Who are the colleges?

Mt. San Antonio College in Los Angeles County has a single campus serving about 32,000 students (46% White, 28% Hispanic, 11% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 8% Black). It has an Office of Institutional Research that works in cooperation with an Information Services Office. Highlights of the Mt. San Antonio project are the development of satisfaction surveys in 29 different services areas and the analysis of census data tapes.

San Joaquin Delta College has a single campus of about 19,000 students (60% White, 19% Asian/Pacific Islander, 15% Hispanic, and 6% Black) in the city of Stockton. An Institutional Research and Planning Office conducts research. Delta college has one of the most sophisticated campus data processing systems in California that provides easy access and user friendly information services to administrators, faculty, and students. A significant feature of Delta's program is the comparison of its performance with that of 16 other colleges and the state averages on a variety of indicators.

San Jose-Evergreen is a multi-campus district with two campuses and a central office. The combined enrollment is about 20,000 with a minority of white students and with Latinos and Asians making up about 40 percent of the student body. The Dean of Academic Standards and Matriculation is responsible for research. This project embraces the development of a detailed demographic data base and the production of a variety of maps and reports portraying trends of importance for district planning.

Santa Barbara City College has one campus with about 29,000 students (68% White, 21%

Hispanic, 8% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Black). A district research committee with broad representation throughout the college coordinates research. A major feature is the use of faculty release time to produce reports useful for faculty planning and development efforts. The project coordinates with a variety of ongoing projects, including accreditation self-study, development of the statement of institutional direction, ongoing planning processes, program review, matriculation, and staff development.

The college point of view

The experiences of the colleges were distilled with the help of the task force to produce a guide for the initial design of local accountability and institutional effectiveness programs (Mills, Amsler, and Kirsch, 1991). A particular goal was to clarify the local perspective on accountability. The guide defines accountability as a way for colleges to prove to themselves and others what they are accomplishing and to design ways to monitor and ensure continued success. A basic insight was recognizing that the system should serve the needs of both the state and the college. The state needs information to assess achievement of the systemwide mission. The institution needs information to determine where and how to improve teaching, learning, and student support. The following implementation issues, cited from the guide, illustrate the vision of useful local accountability programs -- which goes far beyond the initial idea of centralized data collection and reporting towards the idea of institutional effectiveness.

> "Leadership. A strong accountability system requires strong leadership. College leaders must be committed to its value and importance. Leadership is key in developing an appropriate vision of the accountability process. Leaders must pose essential questions: Who is responsible for what? What is to be accomplished? What necessary resources will be made available? How will the institution know if goals

have been met?"

"Access to information. Access to information is vital to the design of an effective accountability process. In an open system, important data would be shared with all sectors of the campus because information is viewed as important to all the members of the college community. ... groups not included in the information-access loop cannot be held accountable for decisions that are made."

"Stakeholders. Who should be included in the accountability loop? ... A narrow definition of stakeholders can limit the effectiveness of the accountability process. Most administrators would agree that buy-in and participation of campus stakeholders is desirable. Colleges will differ, however, about who to include and to what degree information should be shared."

"Compliance vs. Internal Use. Reporting must be seen as a tool clearly linked to internal decision making. If viewed solely as complying with the demands of external agencies, such as the legislature or the Chancellor's Office, then there will be no impetus to make links to such vital institutional activities as planning and resource allocation. To be motivated to invest enough time to develop an effective accountability system, institutional stakeholders must perceive such a system as central to the health of their college. They must be convinced that the system will not be burdensome to operate and that it will help them function better."

Barriers to performance

The writing of the guide helped to produce a consensus that a locally oriented program of institutional effectiveness not only satisfies college interests but could also improve the

quality of information submitted to the Chancellor's Office. If this is true, what are the main issues in designing an accountability program for the state? What should the elements of a statewide program be? Hayward, Shimasaki, Guthrie, Koppich and Plecki (1991) conducted a study in order to answer these questions. To obtain broad stakeholder participation in the survey Hayward et al. interviewed officials of the Chancellor's Office, the office of the Legislative Analyst, the Department of Finance, the California Postsecondary Education Commission, the pilot program task force and districts, and staff from ten other community college districts not directly involved in the accountability project -- in all representing 30.4% of the state's community college enrollment.

Although the study set out to make recommendations regarding the implementation of a statewide accountability program, it ended up focusing on a more critical issue -- the system's readiness for implementation. Although some colleges, with appropriate funding, could meaningfully participate in an accountability or institutional effectiveness program, many others are not yet ready to do so. Four areas of college need emerged: (1) utilization of Management Information Systems (MIS); (2) research capability; (3) the patchwork of existing accountability requirements; and (4) local perceptions of state requirements.

The great diversity among colleges in MIS capability has its roots in the highly decentralized governance of the California Community College system. Various mainframes used by colleges include Hewlett-Packard, UNISYS, Burroughs, and IBM, among other less popular brands. The type of software used by colleges depends, of course, on the available hardware, and types of application, whether administrative or research, and the type of access (decentralized "hands-on," or centralized "at a distance") granted to users. Some colleges contract out for data processing services, and others develop in-house resources. A number of the visited colleges were not able to supply information required

by the state and without additional funding were not prepared to develop their systems.

Institutional research functions appeared even more disparate across colleges than Management Information Systems. At some colleges research consisted of little more than arraying data for reports, with little emphasis on assessment, analysis, or evaluation. In a few colleges institutional research was a part of planning and other decision making activities. Colleges cited state and federally required reports with minimal local utility as one reason for lack of sophistication of institutional research offices. The burden of meeting these external requirements detracted from investment in local research capacity. Ironically, colleges commented that external reporting tended to reduce their access to data. State and federal agencies appear unable to provide easy access to data submitted by colleges in formats that are locally useful, and many colleges do not have the resources to do it on their own.

Colleges mentioned the confusion and multiplicity of already existing "accountability" requirements. Categorical programs for matriculation assessment, disabled students, the economically disadvantaged, vocational education, and for student aid already require compliance reporting. These uncoordinated state and federal requirements hamper many colleges from pursuing a more comprehensive accountability strategy.

College staff described various deeply rooted perceptions that mitigated against the implementation of a new accountability program. While the study did not examine the foundations of these perceptions, Hayward et al. note that peoples' feelings can influence their behavior.

a) Past promises of access to submitted data have not been kept.

b) Colleges are already overburdened with information requests that have no discernible useful purpose, resulting in a lack of commitment to data quality.

c) There are too many uncoordinated duplicate requests for information from various units within the Chancellor's Office

d) There are fears of divisive, inappropriate comparisons between colleges -- needlessly exacerbating the already difficult task of managing institutions.

The state's role

Despite this doleful litany of opposition, Hayward et al. found that colleges tended to see the importance of efforts directed at the improvement of local programs. Viable institutional effectiveness programs are seen as locally useful. Colleges grudgingly concede that state level accountability is a political necessity, although they would like clearer guidance and leadership. The study recommended a program to overcome problems and build state and local capacity for accountability.

1. Basic data collection and reporting. The Chancellor's Office would annually compile routinely collected information from the statewide Management Information System and other programs. New data collection burdens would be minimized. The Chancellor would determine the data elements and report formats after consultation with the field.

2. In-depth accountability studies. Each year the Chancellor's Office would prepare an in-depth study of one of five areas: student access, student success, student satisfaction, faculty diversity, and fiscal condition. Colleges and interested state agencies would consult in the design of the studies that would produce information for program improvement. For

example, these studies could serve to identify and help disseminate exemplary practices of colleges that operate particularly successful programs.

3. Statewide surveys. The Chancellor's Office would periodically conduct sample surveys of long and short term student satisfaction, transfer to senior institutions, and job placement. Both state and local officials have expressed interest in such information, which can be very burdensome for colleges to collect on their own. Once developed, the state could share these surveys with colleges that wish to collect more detailed information about local conditions.

4. More effective data collection and dissemination. The Chancellor's Office would systematically eliminate all duplicative and redundant information requests. The basic idea is that colleges should report data one time only and that the Chancellor's Office should coordinate the use of that information. Further, data transmission should shift from the cumbersome circulation of magnetic tapes to a statewide electronic network. The network should facilitate local access to submitted information.

5. Depository/clearinghouse. The Chancellor's Office would serve as a depository for exemplary accountability models and provide technical assistance to colleges as they establish their own programs. In addition to providing technical assistance documents and staff development services, this office would help to link up colleges who need assistance with other colleges that can share their expertise.

A statewide indicators report

Table 1 displays the outline of a statewide indicators report that gradually emerged through dialogue with the colleges, the task force, representatives of interested state

Table 1: Indicators for Statewide Community College Accountability Reporting

	CONTEXT	INPUT	PROCESS	OUTCOME
STUDENT ACCESS	General enrollment Transition from High School	Financial aid recipients	Categorical programs Basic skills and ESL enrollment	
STUDENT SUCCESS				Persistence Completion Transfer to four year institutions Job placement
STUDENT SATISFACTION				Satisfaction with: • access • instruction • services • facilities
STAFF COMPOSITION			Faculty demographics Full- or part-time faculty assignment	
FISCAL CONDITION	Federal, state and local funding Fiscal stability			

agencies, and community college researchers. The selection of performance indicators was an essential part of the accountability program. Work done by Oakes (1986), Murnane (1987), and National Center for Education Statistics (1988, 1991b) helped to furnish starting points. The major principles underlying the design of the report follow.

a) An indicator is a measurable characteristic of the condition of the community colleges

b) Restrictions on the number of indicators are suggested by the burden associated with the processing and use of information

c) Indicators should represent the characteristics of colleges that are related to desired student outcomes

d) The indicators are primarily of statewide interest. Colleges at their discretion may augment the list to provide more useful descriptions of local conditions

e) Appropriate background information helps to interpret outcomes, i.e., context (the environment in which colleges operate); input (fiscal resources and policies); and processes (plans and activities to meet student needs).

What does it mean?

This study began by asking what "accountability" means. The main finding of this study is that accountability in this context has two meanings. At the state level it ties to educational finance, competition for funds, and the desire to make policy based on objective, defensible information. At the local, college level it refers to institutional effectiveness.

The context for defining the meaning of accountability in California is one of shrinking and more centralized funding. A 1987 study by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) described California's school finance in the early 1980s was "unstable and uncertain." The tax reform measures in the 1970s cut property taxes in half and severely limited the ability of state and local governments to expend revenues. These fiscal measures tended to centralize educational finance at the state level. Funding in constant dollars declined and student enrollments increased. Driven by entitlements and political necessity other government programs, e.g., prisons, social, and medical services, absorbed ever larger percentages of available funds.

Educational accountability could be used to support for increased funding for schools and colleges and make decisions. (Hayward, 1991)

> "State level interviewees tended to view a useful accountability system as one which would assist them in arriving at three types of allocation recommendations regarding: 1) the distribution of increasingly scarce state resources between competing segments, 2) targeting funds on programs judged to be relatively more effective than others, and 3) providing a rationale for seeking additional funds.
>
> One set of questions faced by state control agencies revolves around the determination of the optimal mix of state funds among the various providers of education. Should the state pay for remedial courses at the University of California or only fund those programs at the community college and high school adult level? Can adult education courses be more cost-effectively offered by high school adult education programs or community college programs? Is the current allocation of vocational education funds optimal or should a higher percentage of the funds flow

to the institutions which can most cost-effectively offer vocational programs?

Another set of questions revolves around decisions about program offerings within segments. Would the state be better served by allocating more dollars for matriculation or for EOPS? Should there be additional state incentives provided for establishing more effective transfer programs or for investing in "tech-prep" vocational programs? These are all important questions which have frustrated budget analysts for years and cause them to seek better information to inform these critical decisions.

A third set of questions centers on the frustration expressed by the Chancellor and his staff who argue that an effective statewide accountability system would enable his office to provide strong rationale for the budget requests to the Governor and the legislature for additional funds."

The education finance issues demonstrate an input oriented rationale for accountability. By contrast, a resulted oriented stimulus for institutional effectiveness is found in public concern over student outcomes. California, along with many other states and the federal government, has harbored the perception of a troubled education system. (Fetler, 1986; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1988; Mirga, 1989; Kaagan and Coley, 1989). Although this mentality has traditionally focused on supposed deficits in K-12 education, there is a growing consensus that postsecondary institutions also need attention. (National Center for Education Statistics, 1991; Albert, 1991; Ewell, 1991) For example, goal five of the Bush administration's America 2000 Program pertains directly to higher education: "Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of leadership." This goal is attainable in part through "better and more

accountability." Higher education is part of a larger system whose needs require more than action in only the K-12 segment. The results of the pilot program suggest that the way to improve student outcomes is locally run institutional effectiveness programs.

How might institutional effectiveness programs work to improve student outcomes? A systemic approach (e.g., Kaagan and Coley, 1989) would specify a model with major goals, programs, instructional methods, and resources. Use the model to identify important obstacles to success, leverage points for change, and to devise indicators that describe the functioning of the model. Try out different strategies and monitor the indicators to gauge effectiveness. Use the feedback to refine the model and strategies for improvement.

Although this approach has intuitive appeal, the results of the pilot program suggest that it leaves out the factor of stakeholder participation. The traditional control of curriculum and instruction by faculty indicates that faculty groups should have a voice in developing institutional effectiveness programs. Students, and trustees as well as administrators need to be involved to the extent that the success of the institutional effectiveness program depends on their cooperation, commitment, or acceptance. These findings appear consistent with Bickman and Peterson's (1990) observation that different stakeholders -- including accrediting agency representatives, trustees, administrators, faculty, students, business or community leaders have differing ideas about which outcomes are most desirable and how they should best be pursued. Muffo's (1990) national survey of status of student outcomes assessment at colleges and universities appears to confirm this finding. "Involving the faculty in the process is seen as critical to overcoming initial skepticism, resistance, and fear."

A number of features of the state accountability program are similar to recommendations

sometimes made in Total Quality Management (TQM) programs: the involvement of stakeholders; strong leadership for improvement of teaching and learning; developing higher quality and more useful data systems; making decisions based on objective information; and interest in customer (e.g., student, faculty) satisfaction. (Marchese, 1991) Despite the interest in these features, colleges did not embrace the idea of TQM as an institutional effectiveness strategy. Informal discussions unearthed specific reservations: the business jargon sounded alien; TQM might just be another "here today, gone tomorrow" fad; and doubt that TQM was consistent with traditions of academic freedom for faculty. While some permutation of the TQM philosophy may become popular in academic settings, this study suggests that some accommodation from business environments to academic settings will facilitate its acceptance by educators.

Summing up

If concern about the quality of student outcomes abides, and the competition for public funds remains unabated, there will likely be enduring legislative interest in accountability and institutional effectiveness programs. It is difficult to fault desires to make better public policy decisions using appropriate information, or to continuously improve the quality of teaching and learning. A risk is that reporting of a few numbers or test scores will foster a one-dimensional, unrealistic view of education. Perhaps the thoughts about physics of Niels Bohr, the Nobel prize winning scientist can provide some guidance. Bohr remarked that the task of physics is not to find out how nature is. Physics concerns what we can say about nature. And the best we can say is always partial and incomplete; only by entertaining multiple and mutually limiting points of view, building up a composite picture, can we approach the real richness of the world.

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